
THE 16TH ANNUAL STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

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Clarence “Du” Burns Council Chambers
City Hall



The Honorable Stephanie Rawlings-Blake
49th Mayor of the City of Baltimore

THE 2015 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Mr. President, members of the City Council, Madam Comptroller, friends and colleagues in government, faithful clergy, committed citizens of Baltimore City: thank you for the opportunity to report on the state of our city as we work together to grow Baltimore.

I want to recognize a few special people. I know that without their help, love and support, I could not juggle the duties of being mayor with the responsibilities of being a mother and a wife. As the mother of an 11-year-old daughter, I, like the many other working parents in this room, often look to my family for help. I want to thank my husband Kent, my mother, and my entire family for all they do every day.

A Baltimore We Love

I was born and raised in Baltimore. I am a Baltimore girl through and through.

My mother is from the Eastside. She graduated from Dunbar. My father is from the Westside. He grew up in Poe Homes and graduated from Douglass. I am a very proud graduate of Western High School. And I am also very proud that my daughter attends Baltimore City Public Schools.

I LOVE this city.

I love peppermint sticks at Flowermart; egg custard snowballs; Lake Montebello and Druid Hill Park; taking my daughter to Mimi DiPietro ice rink; the pageantry of Honfest; and black-eyed susans at Preakness.

But you know what I really love about Baltimore? The people.

The people of this city have heart, passion, and determination. I would say we have grit. When the British invaded, we fought and we won. When the Great Fire burned our city, we rebuilt. After decades of decline and flight from our city, today, we grow. We are scrappy. We are resilient. We are proud. Whenever anyone tries to count Baltimore out, we prove them wrong.

That is why I am so honored to serve as your mayor.

Grow Baltimore

In my inaugural address, I laid out a challenge. It was time for us to be bold—to focus on growing Baltimore. I wanted to not only attract new families, but to improve the quality

of life for those already here. We are doing great things in Baltimore. No one can deny that we have turned a corner. New families, new millennials, and new companies are increasingly choosing to make Baltimore their home. And more are choosing to stay. For the first time in decades, the city is growing.

We all know Baltimore is great, but just listen to what others are saying about us. We are a city of innovators. Both *Popular Mechanics* and *Consumer Reports* rank our city as one of the nation's best for start-ups. We are a smart city. *Forbes* magazine ranks us as the sixth smartest city in America. We have been described as a “cool” city for millennials, and we are the fourth fastest growing city for that demographic. We are a city with great history, arts, and culture. *USA Today* says we are home to one of the best arts districts in America, and Fort McHenry ranks as one of the country's best national monuments. We are a city of outstanding colleges and universities. We are home to the best hospitals in the world. Patients travel from all corners of the globe for treatment at Johns Hopkins. The University of Maryland sets the standard for world class trauma care.

Building a Strong Fiscal Foundation

We are a strong city, but like every other city across the country, we have challenges.

From the beginning, I made it clear I would not leave our toughest issues for other elected leaders to solve, or pass along inevitable doomsday crises to our children. Instead, we chose a different path. We reformed pensions. We began a path toward a 10-year financial plan, giving us an opportunity—over a reasonable period of time—to fix our long-term structural deficit while protecting our shared priorities.

In July, Standard & Poor's upgraded the City's credit rating to AA, affirming that we are on the right fiscal path. Coupled with the same rating from Moody's, this represents the highest combined rating of Baltimore City from both agencies in more than 50 years. Over the long term, this will save taxpayers millions of dollars on construction projects, like schools, roads, and recreation centers. I intend to continue making decisions that will maintain our long-term fiscal stability.

As we took on these huge financial challenges, we moved ahead with our promise to reduce the city's residential property tax rate. Whether you are a first-time homebuyer, a growing family, or a life-long resident, I want you to stay in Baltimore. Since I introduced my plan to reduce property tax rates for homeowners 20 cents by the year 2020, I have been working responsibly and steadily to provide real tax relief. That is why, when I announce next year's budget proposal, I will deliver yet another cut—making a reduction of about 14 cents since I took office. I promised that I would reduce property tax rates, and that is a promise I am keeping.

Making Baltimore Safer

In addition to creating a solid financial foundation for our city to grow, our top priority has been making our city safer.

First and foremost, we must thank the men and women who selflessly risk their lives to protect our citizens each and every day. We were reminded of their sacrifices this year, with the tragic deaths of Police Officer Craig Chandler and Fire Lieutenant James Bethea. I would like all of us to take a moment of silence in honor of our fallen heroes.

In 2014, under the leadership of Police Commissioner Anthony W. Batts, we made progress in our ongoing fight to make our streets safer. Last year, we experienced declines in every major crime category—including a 10 percent decline in homicides, resulting in the second lowest number of annual homicides in a generation. I am encouraged by our progress, but I am still not satisfied. One victim is too many, one life is too many, and one senseless tragedy is more than any of us should bear. I know, because I, too, have been there. We know a more proactive police department will ensure fewer families feel that pain.

People want to see more police on the streets. So last month, we launched a new system of scheduling our patrol officers. This new schedule is expected to produce real results for residents: more officers during peak times, and a faster response to citizen calls. This change was accomplished in partnership with the Fraternal Order of Police, and I want to thank the FOP and its president, Gene Ryan, for working with us.

In addition to seeing more police on the streets, residents often tell me they want to know the officers in their community. Just as important, our officers should know the people they are sworn to protect. We now have foot officers walking in communities throughout our city every single day.

Additionally, we have continued our intense focus on repeat violent offenders. With our partners at the federal level, we put nearly 90 members of gang organizations in federal prison with enhanced sentences.

Meanwhile, the department's Operation CeaseFire led to a 45 percent reduction in homicides in the Western District. This year, we are expanding Operation CeaseFire to the Eastern District.

I want to thank our new State's Attorney, Marilyn Mosby, who has hit the ground running in her first few months in office. I welcome her to our fight against repeat violent offenders, and I look forward to our partnership producing results for the citizens of Baltimore.

We have also seen tremendous gains in fire safety, thanks to the hard work of Chief Ford and the men and women of our fire department. With their efforts, we have sustained reductions in fire-related deaths and improved EMS response times. I want to thank the presidents of our fire unions, Rick Hoffman and Michael Campbell, for working with us on a new contract, which has enabled substantive changes in scheduling and an overall reduction in overtime spending.

Restoring Public Trust

Our public safety efforts are more effective and efficient, but we have not stopped there. We have been actively working to improve community trust while also producing results for all citizens.

Citizen complaints alleging excessive force are down 46 percent. Police discourtesy complaints are down 53 percent. Notices of lawsuits alleging police misconduct are down dramatically over the past three years. We know the overwhelming majority of our officers treat our residents with dignity, respect, and courtesy. They wear the badge with honor and demonstrate reverence for the position they hold in our community. However, it only takes a few bad actors to damage the reputation of an entire city.

Over the past year, we have held nine public safety forums, where Commissioner Batts and I heard from residents who called on us to do more. To that end, we are working to bring body cameras to the police department. As many of you know, my body camera working group presented its findings last month. They recommended a pilot program with specific policy proposals to ensure that we incorporate this technology in a way that builds community trust while protecting the privacy rights of our citizens. The pilot program will be in place later this year. By taking time to evaluate different technology options and work through operational logistics, our police department can become a national leader in the use and implementation of body cameras.

Additionally, we are working to make reforms to the statewide laws governing police misconduct. The improvements we have proposed to the Law Enforcement Officers Bill of Rights were inspired by our conversations with community leaders, and offer an important step toward enhancing public trust.

This is just one example of my administration's broader initiative to rebuild public trust in local government. We now post the details of legal settlements in cases of alleged police misconduct on our Law Department's website. And in order to do a better job of rooting out fraud and corruption in city government, I have more than doubled the budget and staff for the Office of the Inspector General.

Additionally, we worked with the city's delegation in Annapolis to bring real change, accountability, and transparency to the Liquor Board. The board is providing better enforcement of our laws, rules, and regulations in a manner that is more responsive to our neighborhoods.

I also created the City's Billing Integrity Unit soon after I became mayor, and we doubled its staff this past year. We are seeing real results. By correcting mistakes that led to excessive charges to homeowners and businesses, and by closing loopholes exploited by some to avoid taxes and fees, the Billing Integrity Unit has had a \$15 million impact for taxpayers.

I know how hard you work to pay your fair share. I pledged to go after those who don't, and I am delivering.

A Call to Action

There can be no public trust without public engagement. We show anger over police misconduct, but far too often, we ignore something that should prompt just as much outrage.

Of the 211 tragic killings in our city last year, 189 of the victims were African American men. We need to end the violence in our communities.

This year on Martin Luther King Day, I—along with many of you—joined a local conversation in support of President Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative. There was passion and a determination to do more by everyone in that room. I promised to do more. Our African American men need to believe in their future.

As many of you know, several years ago my brother, Wendell was the victim of a carjacking. He was nearly killed in front of the home where I currently live. After the attack, he told me that as a black man he felt really bad when he hesitated to get out of his car and looked at the two black young men, both under 16, with suspicion, immediately thinking, "They must be up to no good." But he continued to my front door. They followed him and attacked him with a sword, almost decapitating him.

Thankfully—unlike too many other victims of violent crime—my brother lived. And I am humbled by the conviction and sense of purpose he demonstrated after the attack. He worked at a nonprofit for several years, developing after school programs, serving as a mentor to many young people, and working in several recreation centers throughout the city. He continues a relationship with his mentees to this day. He, along with many other black men in our community, inspire me.

Today, I am announcing the start of an intense focus on our African American young men. At the end of this month, I will bring together community leaders and experts for a “Call to Action to End African American Homicides.” I want to thank Rev. Dr. Jamal Harrison Bryant for serving as our moderator for this inaugural forum.

Through this call to action, we will recruit men committed to making a difference in the lives of our children to serve as mentors, volunteers, tutors, job training coaches, speakers, and more. We will reach out to organizations that are already working on this issue, and we will encourage others to join. We will not do it alone. We cannot do it alone. And most importantly, we cannot afford to fail.

Expanding Recreational Opportunities

As we focus on the youth of our city, we know that growing Baltimore means creating more recreational opportunities for them. Our young people must be kept safe and engaged. Before I came into office, the City was closing recreation centers without any substantive plan for how to fill in the gaps. I knew we could do better.

In Morrell Park, we opened Baltimore City’s first newly constructed recreation center in nearly a decade. In Clifton Park, we renovated and expanded the Rita Church Community Center, and are now building a new gym. In Park Heights, we are expanding C.C. Jackson to complement the new athletic fields. Additionally, in Cherry Hill and Cahill, we are set to break ground on new recreation centers later this year.

But if we really care about quality recreation for our kids, we need access to more funding. That is why my administration has put forward a proposal to sell a few downtown garages, and use that money to build new recreation centers and upgrade many more. Members of the council, I call on you today to bring my plan forward. We all agree our children deserve better! This bill deserves a hearing!

Educating Our Children

This work will complement the most significant school construction effort in our city’s history—a nearly \$1 billion dollar investment that will make possible major improvements to our school buildings, which are the oldest in the state.

The success of our schools is not measured solely by the quality of the buildings, but more importantly, by the achievements of our children and their teachers in the classroom. And we are seeing real success.

Children enrolled in our Head Start programs have improved their school readiness—up 11 percentage points in the past three years. More students are graduating from our high

schools, while the city's drop-out rate has declined by more than 50 percent over the last five years. Overall enrollment is up, and our public charter schools are in high demand. More families have confidence in the quality of our schools. This is critical if we are going to continue to grow.

I would like to take a moment to recognize schools CEO, Dr. Gregory Thornton, for his work during his first nine months here in Baltimore.

While we have made major gains, the school system is facing serious challenges. Like many of you, I am deeply troubled by the proposed state cuts to our city schools. Yes, I realize that our schools face their own budget challenges that must be addressed, but the state should not compound the problem with additional cuts.

Like our new governor, I encountered significant budget challenges when I first took office. I set priorities and made sure they were protected. We cannot allow the state to balance its budget at the expense of our children's future. We must protect the progress we have made. I pledge to continue my work with our partners in Annapolis to protect funding for our schools.

Ensuring our Children are Healthy

As we focus on educating our children, we must also focus on our children's health and wellbeing.

That is why I am so proud of the B'More for Healthy Babies initiative. Since 2010, we have seen a 24 percent decline in our city's infant mortality rate, as well as a 32 percent decline in our teen birth rate. Under the leadership of our new health commissioner, Dr. Leana Wen, we will expand the Healthy Babies initiative to school-age children. In the coming months, we will launch our B'More for Healthy Kids and our B'More for Healthy Teens initiatives. We will focus on nutrition, exercise, and the unmet health care needs of our children.

Dr. Wen knows a growing city must be a healthy city. She has already brought together our city's pediatric leaders in support of measles vaccinations. She has also set an aggressive agenda focused on addiction and preventing overdose deaths in our city. Together, we will implement the findings from my Heroin Treatment and Prevention Task Force, which will be released by the summer.

Baltimore has been an innovator in many areas of public health, and we look forward to sharing our successes with the rest of Maryland and the nation.

Improving Quality of Life in Neighborhoods

We are not only growing our city by improving the health of our residents, but together, we are growing Baltimore by making our city cleaner.

Last summer we launched our municipal trash can pilot program, and it is already showing positive results. We are also replacing our older street sweepers, and—for the first time—we have added mechanical alley sweeping to almost a dozen neighborhoods each week. We have nearly doubled the number of workers in our rat abatement program, allowing us to implement a systemic, robust rat control strategy for our neighborhoods, as opposed to simply responding to complaints.

We are also investing in sustainable transportation efforts. The Planning Commission will vote on the City's bike master plan later this month. This plan establishes an expansion of our bike route network to create a more bike-friendly Baltimore. I am issuing an executive order establishing a Mayor's Bike Advisory Commission to help guide our efforts.

And, during this session in Annapolis, I will continue to fight to move the Red Line forward. The business community and our anchor institutions made a very public expression of support for the Red Line earlier this winter. They know how transformative the Red Line will be for growth and economic development in our city. The Red Line is a jobs line, and we cannot let this opportunity slip by. Let's work together to build the Red Line now.

Creating Economic Opportunities

We are creating jobs for City residents. Since I came into office, our city's unemployment rate has declined by a third. And during those five years, the number of jobs in our city has increased by more than 12,000.

Just look at the remarkable progress we have made in the past few months. The application fair for the new Amazon fulfillment center drew huge numbers of job seekers. Companies such as Pandora, Maryland Automobile Insurance Fund, and Vaccinogen have announced they are moving their headquarters—and their jobs—from the suburbs into our City. The Horseshoe Casino, which opened this past summer, exceeded its local hiring commitment and provided more than 1,300 new jobs to Baltimore City residents.

Meanwhile, a number of our existing companies are staying and growing in Baltimore. You know about Under Armour's success and proposed expansion, but you might not know about the investment banking firm Stiefel Nicolaus choosing to stay in the Central Business District, or Pegged Software announcing its plans to more than double its workforce, or biotech firm Emergent BioSolutions doubling the size of its manufacturing

facility on Lombard Street, with plans to add another 158 jobs in Baltimore. These companies—and many others like them—are evidence that Baltimore is a great investment.

But as we continue to build an environment in which job creators can grow, we still recognize that too many of our citizens are being left behind. That is why I hired Jason Perkins-Cohen to serve as the new director of the Mayor's Office of Employment Development. Jason brings a tremendous record of advocacy and results, connecting our hardest to employ citizens with the jobs they need. I want to create job opportunities for all our citizens, not just those with college degrees.

That is why, when I learned the Magna Center was closing, I was determined to find a way to continue providing manufacturing skills training, so citizens can provide for their families. I am proud to announce that, this spring, we will be opening a new Regional Skills Training Center in Park Heights. This center will offer advanced manufacturing skills training through JARC, a nationally recognized nonprofit organization.

Promoting Small Business

Let's not forget that growing Baltimore also means nurturing small business.

I have repeatedly said that my goal is to establish Baltimore as a destination for entrepreneurship, a place where small, local, women-owned, and minority-owned businesses can start and grow.

Earlier this year, I eliminated and reduced many of the minor privilege fees charged to our small businesses. In order to extend our capacity and reach even more entrepreneurs, I propose doubling the funding of the Small Business Resource Center in next year's budget. Many new business owners tell us that the early support they received at our center was critical to their success. This would allow us to create a more robust portfolio of services, and expand outreach programs directly to neighborhood businesses.

Two years ago, we launched the City's first microloan program—and we are already seeing tremendous results. Our BaltimoreMICRO program has closed on 21 micro loans, that triggered more than \$1.9 million in capital investment, generated 106 new jobs, and supported 130 existing jobs. Even better is that more than half of the loans were provided to minority- or women-owned businesses. And we are doing even more.

Today, I am releasing my Strategic Plan for Small Business and Entrepreneurship Growth in Baltimore. The plan contains 20 specific action items to increase resources for small businesses, cultivate the innovation economy, promote an inclusive economy, and make Baltimore more business-friendly. These actions include launching a new online entrepreneurship resource network and establishing a new \$1 million Innovation Fund to help small and medium size businesses adapt to the latest technology.

All of these initiatives align perfectly with the City's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, recently published by the Baltimore Development Corporation. This is first time in recent history that the BDC has undertaken a strategic planning process for our city's long-term economic objectives. This comprehensive strategy will focus our efforts on the key growth sectors of our economy while also devoting more attention to empty storefronts and vacant buildings in our communities. I know that BDC President and CEO, William H. Cole, IV, is up to the task of implementing these plans in a way that benefits all of Baltimore's neighborhoods and creates new economic opportunities for our residents.

EconView

All across the city, new projects are emerging in our neighborhoods, from Coppin Heights to Barclay, from Sharp Leadenhall to Remington. As a result of my Apartment Tax Credit, more than 3,200 new apartments are now under construction. Just drive through our neighborhoods and you will see the progress we are creating all over Baltimore City.

I want to be able to highlight what is happening in Baltimore, and what is coming to your neighborhoods. This week, we are rolling out a new online system: EconView. This tool provides a new way for citizens, business owners, and potential new residents and investors to gain a better picture of what is being planned, built, and developed in their neighborhoods.

Revitalizing Neighborhoods

This year, we will mark the five year anniversary of our Vacants to Value program—an internationally recognized effort that is making a real difference in communities across our city. I am particularly proud of how we have leveraged more than \$107 million in private investment. Together, we are winning back neighborhoods that were at the tipping point, block by block. Three thousand vacant homes have been demolished or rehabilitated so far.

While we are creating housing opportunities for new residents, we are also demonstrating a commitment to those who grew up here. We want to improve your neighborhoods, and keep you in the City.

Just ask long-time residents like Janice Jacobs, president of the Ashland Avenue Association, how Vacants to Value has impacted her neighborhood. She describes blocks that were once pocketed with vacant homes, now coming back to life with new investment and new homeowners.

Thank you so much for believing in Baltimore, and for all that you do to make our City stronger.

A Welcoming City

Baltimore has been internationally recognized as a welcoming city, with immigrants moving into our neighborhoods and creating thriving communities.

Last year, I created the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs and released the report "The Role of Immigrants in Growing Baltimore." This report is one of the few in the country highlighting the importance of retaining and attracting immigrants. We are now implementing the 32 recommendations laid out in the report to further strengthen Baltimore as a place of economic opportunity and inclusion. To these new families, I say, "Welcome, and please tell us how we can help."

Celebrating Baltimore

Together, we are growing Baltimore by building on our strengths—and creating new ones. In doing so, we must celebrate our history, our diversity, and our creativity.

Just look at the successful events we had over the past year. The Star-Spangled Spectacular... The Army-Navy game... Artscape... The African American Festival... The Orioles in the post-season... The play-off run by the Ravens... The list goes on and on.

For this year, we have booked a record 29 citywide conventions, expected to draw more than 200,000 attendees and generate almost \$140 million in economic impact. And I am excited for the innovative arts projects that our newly announced Light City Baltimore festival will bring in 2016.

All of these events highlight the vibrancy of our growing City.

Conclusion

All of this is to say, the state of our city IS strong.

We are growing Baltimore! And I plan to keep that momentum going.

We are building a strong fiscal foundation.

We are making Baltimore safer.

We are restoring public trust in government.

We are building new recreation centers and schools.

We are ensuring our children are healthy.

We are creating more jobs and economic activity.

We are growing small businesses and promoting entrepreneurship.

We are taking back our vacant properties, one by one, and making our communities stronger.

We are celebrating Baltimore, with our arts, culture, conventions, and sports.

This is the city that we love. We all know it is a city that others fall in love with. A city with the heart and soul to be better every day. A city with pride. A growing city.

I am proud to have led this effort for the past five years, and I am excited to continue to make Baltimore better every day. Together, we can—and we will—grow Baltimore.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless Baltimore.